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MEDIAEVAL GERMAN MYSTICISM

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The German mysticism of the fourteenth century was one of the most remarkable manifestations of that individualistic trend of thought and feeling which set in during the thirteenth century with the height of chivalric culture, developed under the influence of the growth of civic independence in the great municipal republics, and finally, in the religious Reformation of the sixteenth century, overturned the whole corporate system of the mediaeval church and state.

The fundamental thought of the German mystics of the fourteenth century was nothing new. It was a revived and christianized Neoplatonism. Throughout the Middle Ages more subtle thinkers had been fascinated by the neoplatonic conception, that the world is an incessant and gradual differentiation of the originally undivided and undifferentiated Divine; that man, however, and man alone, possesses the power by a free act of will to reverse this incessant process of differentiation, and thus to return from the diaspora of manifold phenomena into the oneness of the undivided Divine. The so-called Dionysius Areopagita, Scotus Erigena, Hugo and Richard of St. Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux—these all see the essential goal of human life in this return from the many into the one; they all love to dwell on the different stages of inner concentration by which man approaches this goal; they all praise enthusiastically the state of highest self-surrender where man is completely welded into one with the Divine—as the waterdrop is resolved into wine; or as iron, melting in the fire, seems to become fire, or as the air, illuminated by the sun, seems itself to become sunlight. It is, however, no exaggeration to say that this ideal of complete self-surrender of the individual to the infinite has seldom produced such a variety of individual life as in the German mystics of the fourteenth century. Three of the most pronounced personalities

produced by this mystic longing for the merging of personality in the Divine I shall try briefly to characterize: Master Eckhart, Heinrich Suso, and Johannes Tauler.

A wonderful solemnity and impressive harmony is spread over the thought of Master Eckhart, the intellectual head of the German mystics. The whole universe, from the highest state of purest spirituality to the lowest worm in the dust, is to him the emanation and revelation of one mighty and eternal will. In its most elemental and fundamental form this will is apparently without willing; it is pure, undifferentiated being, uncreated nature; the naught, that is, the negation of all contrasts; the synthesis of all life; the godhead by itself. This infinite and unmodified eternal being, tranquil and unmoved, is, however, at the same time the source of all motion and of all the variety of finite beings. It radiates without losing its substance; as the sun—according to mediaeval physics—sheds light without losing it. The highest form of this self-manifestation of the godhead is the Trinity, which Eckhart conceives of as a constant process of self-realization of the complexity of the infinite and as its constantly renewed awakening to full consciousness. In the Son the Father comes to know himself, and Father and Son create out of their common love the Holy Spirit—a strange mythical birth of divine forms going on unceasingly in the highest regions of spiritual existence. To this transcendental process of a continual divine birth the visible world forms a lower counterpart. Into the visible world the Divine is also constantly discharging itself; yes, only in the fulness of the world, with its countless forms and contrasts, does the Divine find its fullest expression. “All things are God; God is all things. God may not understand himself without me. Before there were creatures, God was not God.” These are some of Eckhart’s sibyllinic formulas to express the divineness of the world. But by the side of this fact of the divineness of life there stands the other fact of its earthiness. We cannot get away from the tragic conflict pervading all life, the conflict between the naught and the aught, between the infinite and the finite, between spirit streaming from above and matter pressing on from below. And thus, after all, in its scale of forms from the most highly organ-

ized beings to inanimate objects, the world presents the spectacle of a gradually diminishing admixture of free spiritual power and a gradually increasing admixture of dead material weight.

Man alone has the faculty of freeing himself from matter, of giving himself fully over to the divine spirit and of thus rising above the conflict which enthralls all creation. "In dumb creation there is something of God, but in the human soul there is God divine. The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one eye." It is only a question of man's becoming fully conscious of his high estate, of his divine nature. "We are to turn the eyes of our reason upon ourselves, and contemplate the nobility of our spiritual being, and recognize that we have been so formed as to be by divine mercy united to the eternal spirit. And if we thus come to know our own riches, we should find such transcending joy in them that we should care no longer for any outward pleasure and satisfaction." Inwardness, then, is the great goal of life. Through descending into the innermost recesses of the soul, through retiring from the distracting senses into the oneness of the mind, through complete absorption in the spiritual, do we rise above the dualism of life, do we reach the Divine. "When the soul has reached this state, it loses its own self, and God draws it into himself, so that it is entirely absorbed in him, even as the sun draws the morning red into itself so that it is entirely absorbed by light."

He who thus has fully entered into the *unio mystica* with the Divine has become immune against the perils of circumstance and chance; he has freed himself from the blind superstitions of the multitude; he has emancipated himself from the need of ecclesiastical conventions; he has come near the state of human perfection in which the good will be done for its own sake. "The highest that the spirit may attain in this mortal clay is this: to live in such a manner that virtue is no longer an effort, that is, that all virtues have become so natural to the soul that it not only purposely practises virtue, but makes all virtues shine forth from itself unconsciously, even as though it were virtue itself."

It is certain that Master Eckhart, the doctor of divinity, Domini-

can prior at Erfurt, professor of theology at the school of his order at Cologne, would have inwardly revolted against the idea of harboring unorthodox thoughts. Indeed, a short time before his death he publicly denounced such accusations as misunderstandings of his teaching and explicitly accepted the supreme authority of the church. That, however, the principle of his thought was diametrically opposed to orthodox Christianity, that it tended toward the dissolution of the hierarchical system and toward complete religious freedom, would be clear, even if two years after his death the Roman See had not officially condemned the majority of his teachings and thus formally acknowledged their revolutionary character. Eckhart is indeed a forerunner of modern pantheism. His conception of the world as a continual transition of the godhead from naught to aught, from the potential to the actual, from the formless one to the multiform many, is a clear anticipation of the Hegelian principle of the self-unfolding of the Idea. His ideal of losing oneself in the abyss of the Divine suggests Goethe's "*Weltseele komm! uns zu durchdringen,*" and "*Sich aufzugeben wird Genuss.*" And his description of the highest state of perfection, in which duty has become an instinct, brings to mind Schiller's definition of the Beautiful Soul as that state "where the moral sentiment has taken possession of all the emotions to such a degree that it may unhesitatingly commit the guidance of life to the instinct without running the risk of conflicting with its decisions."

If Master Eckhart points toward the great classic German writers of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, his pupil Suso transports us into the emotional world of Romanticism. And as the intense subjectivity of the Romantic poets has led to a curious oscillation in their works between the two extremes of symbolism and naturalism, so we find these same extremes side by side with each other in the effusions of this mediaeval monk. Suso belongs to those over-refined, erratic personalities, like Amadeus Hoffmann, Poe, Ibsen, Hauptmann, who express themselves only in extremes, who rush from the airiest visions to the grossest materialism, who revel now in ecstatic flights of imagination and now in painful reproductions of crass actuality.

In Suso¹ the emotional tension of German mysticism reaches its climax. The whole strife of a time torn by tremendous conflicts seems to vibrate sympathetically in his soul. It seems as though large and wide-reaching popular disturbances—the struggle between Empire and Papacy, the revolution of the guilds against the city patriciate, the religious reform movements of the “Friends of God” and similar sects, the horrors of the Great Plague, the cruelties of Jew-baiting, the fanaticism of the Flagellants—as though all this had been crowding in upon the contemplative mind of this solitary monk, setting in motion its innermost chords and calling forth therefrom sounds of dark passion and fierce power and then again of sweetest purity and transcendent beauty.

With what knightly courteousness and grace does he, the scion of a patrician family of Constance, describe the chivalric love-service which he offers to his chosen one, Eternal Wisdom, in his cloister cell. “As in Swabia,” thus he narrates in his autobiography, “the young men at New Year ask for a favor from their sweethearts, so he also on New Year’s night turned to his love. Before daybreak he stepped in front of the image where the divine mother holds her lovely child, Eternal Wisdom, on her lap and presses it to her bosom, and he knelt down and began to sing a sequence to the mother, praying that she permit him to receive a wreath from her child, and he was so deeply stirred that the hot tears welled forth from his eyes. And then he turned to Eternal Wisdom, bowed down to the ground, and greeted his love, and spake: ‘Thou, dearest, art my Easter day, my heart’s summer delight, my joyous hour. Thou art the sweetheart whom alone my soul is wooing and craving and for whom it scorns all other loves. Oh, reward me this night, and let me win a wreath from thee.’”

He invites Eternal Wisdom as a guest to his table, and offers her bread and fruit. He sees her in manifold forms. “She hovered,” he says, “high above him on a throne of clouds, she twinkled like the morning star and shone like the sun. Her crown

¹ The following nine paragraphs have already appeared in an article, “A Religious Romanticist,” published in the Outlook for December 3, 1910, pp. 785-788. Until recently, Suso’s writings were accessible only in modern German adaptations. Now, however, we have an authenticated edition of the original text: Heinrich Seuse, *Deutsche Schriften*, herausgegeben von Karl Bihlmeyer, Stuttgart, 1907.

was eternity, her garment was bliss, her mantle all joys' fulfilment. She was far and near, high and low, she was present and yet hidden. She reached above the highest of the heavens and touched the deepest of the earth's abysses. At one moment she appeared as a beautiful maiden, and then suddenly changed into a proud squire. She inclined herself toward him and greeted him kindly and spake lovingly: *Praebe, fili, cor tuum mihi.*"

All this sounds like an echo of chivalric minnesong. How little, however, these feelings had, after all, to do with courtly love, from what a cruelly harsh and hideous reality these ethereal visions came forth, is proved by the narrative of revolting naturalism in which Suso describes the fearful chastisements by which he tried to subdue his rebellious body. "He had himself made an undergarment of hair-cloth, and in the garment straps in which there were inserted fifty and a hundred pointed nails, made of brass and filed sharp on the point, and the points of the nails were turned against his flesh. And he made the garment tight and held together in front, in order that the nails should penetrate the flesh, and he made it so high that it came close up to his face. Herein he slept at night. In summer nights, when it was hot and he was tired from walking and ill, or when he had bled himself and lay exhausted and the vermin pestered him, he would betimes feel as though he were lying in an ant-heap; and would weep and gnash his teeth and say: 'Good God, what kind of death is this! Whom murderers kill or the wild beasts, he is done with it quickly. But I am lying here among this horrible vermin and am dying and yet cannot die.'" And with a similar delight in the repellent, with a similarly gruesome naturalism, he makes Christ describe the horrible disfigurements of his body which he suffered when hanging on the cross. "My right hand was pierced by nails, my left hand was hammered through. My right arm was stretched out of joint, my left arm was drawn out of shape. My right foot was sore with open wounds and my left foot was cruelly mangled. I hung in faintness and exhaustion of all my limbs. The blood was breaking forth from all over my body, making it a gory mass and a horrible sight. I was covered with sores and ulcers."

In the ecstasy of enthusiasm Suso often loses control of himself. He would melt away in rapture when Eternal Wisdom initiates

him into the mysteries of the transubstantiation. Like a mediæval Werther, he would embrace the universe with the arms of love when singing in holy mass the *Sursum Corda*.

This same man, however, experiences all the different matter-of-fact episodes of his life with such an intensity and relates these episodes with such a power and precision of actual observation that they impress the modern reader as scenes of present-day life, and often make one hold one's breath from excitement. Some of these scenes stand before us with a truly marvellous distinctness. How a little girl accuses Suso of having stolen a crucifix, and thereby incites a great tumult against him in the town; how in another village he is accused of having poisoned the wells, and barely escapes death at the hand of the raging mob that has gathered there for the fair; how his sister runs away from the nunnery, and thereby plunges him into the depths of despair until he succeeds in leading her back to her vow; how a lewd woman whom he had tried to convert charges him with being the father of her child and succeeds for a time in making his name despised and rejected; how in a forest on the banks of the Rhine he meets a highwayman and his paramour and is frightened by them out of his wits,—these and similar happenings are told in a manner reminding one of Zola or Tolstoi.

No painter of the Cologne school has represented the idyllic bliss of heaven with more delicate and rosy colors than Suso. "Look upon the beautiful heavenly heath: here summer's delight, here May's festive meadow, here the vale of true bliss. Here you see joyful glances go from love to love; here harping and fiddling; here singing, dancing, and ever rejoicing; here all wishes' fulfillment; here love without sorrow, in everlasting security. Now look upon the countless multitude, how they drink from the welling fountain of living waters; how they gaze upon the clear pure mirror of the godhead in which all things become known to them. Steal still farther forward and look, how the glorious queen of the heavenly land, clad in joy and dignity, hovers above all the heavenly host, how the divine mother of mercy turns her eyes, her mild, merciful eyes, so benignly upon you, how her miraculous beauty gives joy and bliss to the whole heavenly host."

If we contrast with this idyllic vision the fierce, passionate

wailings of a dying man whose voice Suso hears calling for help, we are indeed reminded of the contrast between the Ghent altar of the brothers van Eyck and a Last Judgment scene by Breughel. "O God in Heaven, why was I born into this world? The beginning of my life was crying and weeping, and now my leave-taking is bitter wailing and lamenting. I strike my hands over my head, I wring them feverishly, I turn my glance to all the corners of the world, whether some help or comfort may be found. But it cannot be. I am like a bird that is lying under the claws of a hawk and has lost its senses from fright. My hands begin to wither, my face to grow pallid, my eyes are breaking. Ah, the thrusts of grim death strike my chest! I am heaving heavily, the light of this world grows dim. I am looking into the other world. Great God, what a sight! The gruesome forms of the black Moors are gathering, the hellish beasts have surrounded me, they are lying in wait for my soul. O God, I see the wild raging flames shoot up, hideous monsters pass hither and thither, like sparks in the fire. And thus I depart."

From what has been said it is obvious that the traditional view of Suso as a spiritual minnesinger is far from being adequate. His personality was far too complicated to be a mere reflex or afterglow of the age of chivalric culture. The chords of his soul were so high-strung and vibrated so quickly that the whole fullness of life re-echoed in them. He and his compeers—for he had many kindred and followers, especially in the convents of South Germany—do not point backward to the age of chivalry, they point forward to the great epoch of Flemish and German painting in the fifteenth century. The extraordinary combination of deep religious feeling, of rapturous delight in the mysteries of a divine universe, with minute and often harsh and painful reproduction of the smallest detail of every-day reality which mark fifteenth-century painting from the van Eycks to Dürer, cannot be fully understood without taking into account the intense subjectivity and emotionalism of that phase of the mystic movement which Suso represents.

In Johannes 'Tauler,² the great Strassburg preacher, German

² Only within the last few months has there appeared the first authenticated text of Tauler's sermons: *Die Predigten Taulers* herausgegeben von Ferdinand Vetter, Berlin, 1910.

mysticism of the fourteenth century reaches its fullest popular influence and its sanest and most rational form. Of all mystics, Tauler is the least eccentric; more earnestly than either Eckhart or Suso does he strive for a reconciliation between the absorption of the individual by the Divine and the duties of the individual toward society.

For Tauler, as for his teacher Eckhart, man is originally a part of the godhead. Like Eckhart, he laments the alienation of man from his origin and sees the goal of man in his return to it. But he is less abstruse than Eckhart; he does not revel so much in contemplation of the "formless and shapeless abyss" of the infinite; he lays more emphasis on the striving of man for perfection. In the analysis of the various stages which shall lead man to this perfection, Tauler shows affinity with Suso. But he is separated from Suso by his clearer sense of the attainable, his soberer view of human limitations. With all his predilection for asceticism and renunciation of the world, he is without a trace of fanaticism.

He openly protests against the morbid exaggerations of monkish discipline; he preaches self-control, not self-elimination. In the fine comparison of the human soul with the vine, he represents human nature as an essentially sound and hardy plant whose growth is to be furthered by rational pruning and must not be stunted by senseless mutilation. He asserts that a life of honest labor and faithful fulfilment of every-day tasks is more pleasing to God than eccentric revelling in high inspirations. "Many a man is busy in the world and works for his wife and children, and many a man sits in his shop and makes shoes to get a living, and some poor people go from village to village to earn their bread with great trouble; and, I tell you, all these may fare a hundred times better before God than some would-be prophets." "I know one of the greatest Friends of God, who all his life has been a farmer and is it yet. And he once asked the Lord whether he should give up farming and sit in church. And the Lord said, No; he should rather go on earning his bread by the sweat of his brow; that was the best service he could give to Him." Tauler, then, believes in the divine origin and the divine mission of every calling and every kind of activity; with truly demo-

cratic conviction he praises work as the truest title to nobility; in the right conception of work he sees the way to social peace. "One can spin, another can make shoes, and some have great aptness for all sorts of business, so that they can earn a great deal, while others are altogether without this quickness. These are all gifts proceeding from the Spirit of God. If I were not a priest, but were a member of a guild, I should take it as a great favor that I knew how to make shoes, and should try to make them better than any one else, and would gladly earn my bread by the labor of my hands." "So let every one see to *his* appointed office, and all work thereby for the common good."

In all this we recognize an individualist in the best sense, a man who, standing in the midst of life, has an open mind for the needs and the duties of all classes and of each individual, and who has before his eye the ideal of a democratic society resting upon the mutual acceptance and free co-operation of each and all. The fullest significance, however, of Tauler's individualism comes to light in his utterances on the last and highest questions, on the relation of the individual to God. None of the mystics has conceived of the *unio mystica*, the sinking of deified man in the infinite, in so genuinely human a manner, or in terms so far raised above all exclusively ecclesiastical views. With what a deep, manly earnestness does he oppose to external conventional churchliness the inner self-scrutiny and self-discipline of the individual. "Behold, dear friend, if thou shouldst spend all thy years in running from church to church, thou must look for and receive help from within, or thou wilt never come to any good; however thou mayest seek and inquire, thou must also be willing to be tormented without succor from the outward help of any creature. I tell you, children, that the very holiest man I ever saw in outward conduct and inward life had never heard more than five sermons in all his days. Let the common people run about and hear all they can, that they may not fall into despair or unbelief; but know that all who would be God's, inwardly and outwardly, turn to themselves and retire within." With what a glow of sacred conviction does he describe the necessity of ever deeper scrutiny, ever higher striving, ever purer knowledge, ever freer and fuller surrender, until at last man, without the interposition

of any external institution, finds himself indissolubly welded into one with the Divine. "And if such a man were dragged into the bottom of hell, then there would be the kingdom of God and eternal bliss in hell." And what a truly grand exaltation, what a wonderful vision of human possibilities, is there in the picture which Tauler draws of this state of ideal humanity. "When through all manner of exercises, the outward man has been converted into the inward, reasonable man, and thus the two, that is to say, the powers of the senses and the powers of the reason, are gathered up into the very centre of the man's being,—the unseen depths of his spirit, wherein lies the image of God,—and thus he flings himself into the divine abyss in which he dwelt eternally before he was created, then, when God finds the man thus simply and nakedly turned towards him, the god-head bends down and descends into the depths of the pure, waiting soul, and transforms the created soul, drawing it up into the un-created essence, so that the spirit becomes one with him. Could such a man behold himself, he would see himself so noble that he would fancy himself God, and see himself a thousand times nobler than he is in himself, and would perceive all the thoughts and purposes, words and works, and have all the knowledge of all men that ever were."

Here, we may say, the individualistic tendency of mediaeval German mysticism has reached its consummation. Here the conception of personality has been heightened and deepened to such an extent that it seems impossible to heighten and deepen it further. Certainly the Renaissance, which has so often and so mistakenly been called the classic age of Individualism, has added nothing to it.